Who Cares?
Luke 2:1-14
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Winston Churchill was an exceptional human being. He continues to receive an immense amount of literary attention because he did and said so many things which deserve to be remembered. He was blessed with an exquisite sense of timing and that rare gift of being able to perceive with some accuracy the public significance of his personal behavior. Nowhere is that more clear than in that memorable bit of newsreel footage showing the wartime Prime Minister climbing through the rubble of London. It was at the height of the Blitz: every night, night after night the sirens would wail and the city would tremble in fear as the bombs fell out of the dark sky. Goering's strategy was to reduce London to a pile of bricks, destroying the spirit of the people and their will to resist. It nearly worked. Some say it would have worked had it not been for one man, Winston Churchill. Now, his walks through the bombed-out streets really didn't accomplish anything tangible. But he did communicate something terribly important; namely, that he cared. The Prime Minister cared, and the spirit of the city was buoyed and the will to survive stiffened. Churchill's gesture and the Londoners' courage became an inspiration to the whole world.

When Dwight Eisenhower was elected President the American people were depressed and divided over the stalemate in Korea. The troops were badly demoralized. One of the first things Eisenhower did was to go, personally, to Korea and be with the troops. Again, it was a significant gesture.

There are many historic precedents for a leader acting out his concern for his people by going where they are and walking among them. One of the very oldest is in II Kings, in a rather remote corner of the Old Testament called the Elisha Cycles, Jehoram, King of Israel, was in the capital, which was under long and brutal siege by the Syrians. The people were slowly starving to death and beginning to act like animals. Every day the King appeared on the Wall of the City in full view to make common cause with the people. One day in particular he noted the depths of degradation into which his people had fallen and in a dramatic gesture, removed his royal robes and armour and put on sack cloth, the rough, crude material which indicated mourning. And the people knew that the King really cared.

In a sense that idea is the genius of Biblical religion. God cares about His people. The germinal text is in the Book of Exodus, Chapter 2. The people are in Egypt, in bonded labor. And the text reads: "...And the people of Israel groaned under their bondage, and cried out for help, and their cry came up to God. And God heard their groaning...and remembered His covenant...And God saw the people...and knew their condition." (verses 23-25). That's a dramatic claim. This God isn't hidden away in the recesses of the universe, or amusing Himself on Mt. Olympus. This God hears and sees and knows - and responds to the condition of His people. Miracle of miracles: this God cares!

It is the theme of the Old Testament. When they are making their tortuous way through the wilderness their God is traveling with them and providing for them. After they occupy the land and settle in, one of their prophets, Hosea, tells them that God loves them as a husband loves a wife. Another of their prophets, Amos, suggests that God cares so much that He becomes very angry at their injustice. When they are in Babylonian exile, another prophet announces the coming liberation with words of compassion: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." One of the highest points in all of literature is in the image of God as shepherd, gathering the lambs in His arms, gently leading those that are with young.

This God, the Bible shouts on every page, has a heart. This is a God who cares.

Jesus wept when a friend died. He wept again because of the insensitivity and blindness of Jerusalem. Unlike any model of leadership at the time He obviously and openly and unapologetically cared about people: all sorts and conditions of people: rich, poor, young, old, fishermen, lawyers, doctors, prostitutes: He cared about them and they knew it. At the table of His Last Supper with His dearest friends, He summed up His life and teaching - "This is my commandment, that you love one another..." (John 15:1).

We are, in our day, experiencing a crisis of caring. It was more than a decade ago that we awoke to a new and ugly truth about ourselves. The event that jolted us awake was the murder of Kitty Genovese on the steps of her New York apartment building. The police discovered that many people had seen the initial assault, had watched the attacker run away and then return to complete his crime. Not one pounded a window, yelled, interceded - or even called the police. They didn't want to get involved, they said later. And suddenly we realized that it was happening all around us. People were standing around on sidewalks, busses, subways, watching other people get beaten up. Nobody seemed to care. Not long after that we discovered that an embarassingly large number of Americans were poor, hungry, sick, under educated. A new sense of caring stirred among us: the Government tried to program it and failed. We lost the war on poverty. In fact, we didn't put up much of a fight.

Rollo May, highly respected psychiatrist and author thinks we are in a critical struggle - "The struggle is for the existence of the human being in a world in which everything seems increasingly mechanical, computerized..." (Love and Will,p.292).

The genius of Biblical religion is the idea of God who cares. The moral imperative of Biblical religion is love. The birth of Jesus Christ is the watershed of the idea. Yet, we are in a crisis of caring and those of us who will celebrate the birth ought, it seems to me, to be asking "Why?" with impatient conviction.

Let me make some suggestions. Mobility is one of the reasons. People who are essentially homeless stop caring about others. "Lowered social capacity", Vance Packard called it. If you're new on the block and don't expect to be there very long you aren't likely to carry a meal across the street to a family whose grandfather just died. And pretty soon you won't care much, nor will you expect to be cared about.

The simple bigness of our cities mitigates against caring in any personal way. Poor people, lonely people, elderly people simply get lost in cities: nobody knows them, sees them nor cares much about them. The Christian Century carried a news item about a New York caseworker who lost an appeal for assistance for a client's dog. What caught my attention was her opinion that dogs are the only "significant other" for a lot of city people. The New York Times several years ago editorialized about an elderly woman dying of Parkinson's disease in a hospital, who simply would not cease asking to go home. A caseworker was dispatched to find out what was so appealing and important about home for the old lady. She found a filthy, one room flat, with a bed, and a teddy bear, worn thin from hugging apparently. It's hard to care in the city.

But I'm most concerned about another reason altogether, an insidious conspiracy to teach us and our children that human life is cheap, that individual human life isn't very important; that it is weak to care too much; that suffering is casual, that violent death is everyday, OK, and exciting to watch.

Vietnam started it, I suppose, by bludgeoning our normal sensitivities with body counts and nightly news in living color. I think the battle for humanity - for caring - is being lost, and the battlefield is Television and Motion Pictures. The National Council of Churches raised the issue with television stations about a movie, "Death Wish", in which violent vigilante-style justice is admiringly presented. Most of the stations didn't respond. One of the Holiday Season's favorites this year is "Two Minute Warning", which allows the movie goer to feel how it is to be a sniper in a crowded football stadium. One reviewer said: "Only one emotion is stirred, a hatred of life that revels in gushing blood and violent death." (The Christian Century, December 15, 1976 p. 11-15).

Paddy Chayefsky has produced a new movie, "Network" which raises the whole issue of violence and pornography on television - as the way to improve one's position in the Neilson Ratings. In an interview in Time Magazine he stated the case: "Television coarsens all the complexities of human relationships, brutalizes them, makes them insensitive. The point about violence is not so much that it breeds violence - though that is probably true - but that it totally desensitizes viciousness, brutality, murder, death so that we no longer actively feel the pains of the victim or suffer for the mourners or feel their grief." (Time, December 13, 1976,P.79).

And even today as that barbaric drama continues in Utah, reporters are badgering state officials for permission to cover and photograph the execution of Gary Gilmore.

Out of all of this, I think, is emerging a new life style; a new ethic almost. It may be described with words like "detached - uninvolved - cool." In personal terms it is an approach to life which looks suspiciously at all close and caring relationships and regards others as "things" to be used. In social terms it is a mentality that regards "Bleeding heart; do gooder" as a criticism instead of a high compliment.

I suppose it is a matter of our own will to survive. Each of us does build a wall around ourselves. If my brother bleeds, I bleed too. If he hurts, I hurt. I can't feed them all, or even very many. And so it's simply easier not to know - not to care.

The genius of Biblical religion is the idea of a God who cares. The birth of Jesus Christ is its watershed. Social Science knows the truth of the Biblical genius. When we forget how to care something precious and essential to our very humanity is lost. Infants need caring - T.L.C. in hospital jargon - to survive. Psychotherapy doesn't work unless the patient knows that the Doctor cares. Caring is the cement that holds civilization together. It is the only magic there is in marriage and the intense relationships of families.

The late Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher, in his book I and Thou , deepened our understanding of the importance of caring. "Existence", he wrote, "will remain meaningless for you if you do not penetrate into it with active love. Everything is waiting to be hallowed by you...Meet the world with the fullness of your being and you shall meet God. If you wish to believe, love!" (Expository Times, November 1976, p.64).

That's how important it is. Buber suggested that we will meet God when we care about and love our neighbor: when we will that the other person become a "thou" and not an "it".

There is a beautiful line in W.H.Auden somewhere about "Remembering the stable where for once in our lives everything became a You and nothing was an It." The birth of Jesus Christ is the eloquent drama of God's caring. Like Jehoram, and Churchill and Eisenhower, the birth of Jesus Christ is God saying, "I walk the streets of your cities: I care deeply and passionately about what happens in them." The birth, in a setting that could not be more humble and human, is God saying to every individual, "I care about you. I walk with you. You matter to me. I hurt when you hurt and rejoice when you laugh."

In Bethlehem that which is eternal and cosmic and unfathomable becomes suddenly very personal. I become a "Thou" as I stand in front of a manger. I matter. This was for me. God cares.

And I celebrate Christmas - I mean really celebrate - when I let that caring ignite a new passion in me.

There is an abundance of sentimentality in the very air at Christmas. The romanticized version of the nativity is quite charming. No one can resist a new born; even Herod, one supposes, could have been persuaded to interrupt the palace party long enough to lift a cup to the newest citizen. But sentiment is not caring. The difference is immense. Tolstoy told about the elegant Russian ladies who cried in the theatre while their coachmen shivered outside in the cold. That's sentiment. That's a large part of what happens in our culture every December.

There is an old Jewish story about a Rabbi who "disappeared from the Synagogue for a few hours every day of Atonement. One of his followers suspects that he is secretly meeting the Almighty, and follows him. He watches as the Rabbi puts on coarse peasant clothes and cares for an invalid woman in a cottage, cleaning out her room and preparing food for her. The follower goes back to the Synagogue and when he is asked, 'Did the Rabbi ascend to Heaven?' he replies, 'If not higher'." (Expository Times, Ibid).

That is what God intended in the birth of Jesus Christ. He cares about you and me. He cares so much He wants us to be fully human: He wants us to discover the joy of our humanity by learning how to care and love. He bent low to be among us that we might rise to our full height, embracing the glory of our humanity by learning how to care deeply.

In the days between now and Christmas each of us will implement the final plans. For each of us those dear customs and traditions are the appropriate way to celebrate the birth of Christ. But I know a secret. I know the way really to do it. I discovered it when I was young, quite by accident. In retrospect I think I learned it by hearing, each year, the lovely story of Why the Chimes Rang in which a little boy secretly places a coin on the altar on Christmas Eve. I had the idea that I ought to give a special and secret gift on Christmas - all on my own. I can recall it vividly. At the Christmas Eve service I carefully placed some money in the offering plate without my parents knowing it. I'm not sure they ever knew I did it. But I do know that I never felt better in my life. That is the secret.

God cares about you and dearly loves you. That is why He sent His Son to be born in Bethlehem. You've heard enough talk about that. If you want to understand it: if you want to experience it deeply - if you want really to celebrate it this year, care - love - give. Mend a relationship, forgive someone, hug someone who needs hugging, give a gift that is generous and unexpected. Break down the wall of detachment you have built between yourself and the rest of the world. Allow the miracle of God's care to ignite a new and passionate caring in you.

That's the Gospel of Christmas. To you - and me - to us - is born, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

> Glory to God in the highest
> and on earth peace among men
> with whom He is pleased.
>
> Amen.

Father, we are grateful for the beauty of this blessed season: for the joy it ignites in our hearts: for Your care which it expresses. Fill us today with Your love - love that has come among us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.